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RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0767
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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 9767
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 7058
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SUBJECT: A/S Blake Views IDP Freedom of Movement at Menik Farm

REF: COLOMBO 1135

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On December 8, one week after the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) announced freedom of movement for internally displaced persons (IDPs), Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake visited the Menik Farms IDP camp complex and several communities to which Tamil-speaking civilians were returning. Other conversations Blake held with GSL officials, opposition figures, and civic activists during his December 8-10 visit were reported separately (reftel). Military and civilian government authorities briefed Blake on accomplishments since the end of the war, requesting support to address current and future challenges -- humanitarian demining and rehabilitation of ex-combatants chief among them. A/S Blake commended the government on "impressive" recent progress and encouraged access for non-governmental organizations to help address priority needs going forward. END SUMMARY.

RETURNS UNDERWAY WITH CHALLENGES

¶2. (SBU) Upon arrival at Menik Farms, the Assistant Secretary -- accompanied by the Charge and USAID officer -- was briefed by Maj. General Kamal Gunaratne, Sri Lanka Army Commander for the Wannai, and Ms. Manmatharajah Charles, Government Agent, Vavuniya District, on government efforts to address the humanitarian needs of more than 100,000 persons who fled the no-fire zone during the final three days of fighting with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in mid-May 2009. Gunaratne credited international non-governmental organizations under the United Nations umbrella for assisting in this "mammoth task." While acknowledging the negative optic of the razor-wire encircled Menik Farms, he said, "They're our people. We're trying our level best to send them back to their villages to live a normal day-to-day life. But it's not easy." Three things have delayed a more expedited return, according to Gunaratne: 1) separating persons with LTTE ties from the IDP population; 2) decontaminating residential areas, economically productive land and public spaces further North from mines and unexploded ordnance; and 3) the establishment of a "comprehensive plan" for resettlement, developed in collaboration between Government Agents, Divisional Secretaries and Grama Nildhari officers in the Northern Province utilizing past electoral lists and available information on land tenure. Blake congratulated both Gunaratne and the Government Agent on "commendable progress on many levels" since his departure from Colombo as U.S. Ambassador in late May.

EX-COMBATANTS

13. (SBU) The GSL waited to lift restrictions on IDP movements to and from camps only after persons with suspected LTTE ties had been removed, Gunaratne said. Suspected LTTE fighters -- now totaling more than 11,700, most housed in separate, closed camps in the Vavuniya District -- were identified either by Military Intelligence or other IDPs, with some former cadres stepping forth voluntarily. Gunaratne said these persons were "trained, indoctrinated and motivated" by an ideology that remained despite the absence of a leadership to propagate it; rehabilitation of ex-combatants would be a GSL priority. The GSL had developed a "comprehensive plan" for this process, to be administered by the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation under the Ministry of Justice, which has sought international advice on a legal framework, which has yet to be defined.

DECONGESTING MENIK FARMS

14. (SBU) Stopping during a drive-through of Zone 2 within the Menik Farms complex, A/S Blake spoke with doctors at a USAID-supported hospital and IDPs congregating at a nearby shop. The smiling shop owner -- himself displaced -- said he was earning nearly 20 USD per day, roughly three times the take-home pay of a skilled laborer. Large patches of bare land were visible where not long ago rows of tents had covered the ground, vacated by more than 50,000 IDPs who had departed in recent weeks, reducing the Zone 2 population to a

COLOMBO 00001146 002.2 OF 003

far more manageable 20,000 persons. The overall number of IDPs in Menik Farms had dropped from a peak total of more than 280,000 to 114,000, which according to an earlier study by UNICEF is low enough to allow IDPs to relocate within the camp should monsoonal rains submerge their shelters. IDPs were upbeat with the expectation that the camp would be emptied by January 31, 2010, the revised end of the 180-day period in which the GSL had earlier committed to having all IDPs from the Wanni back home. The Government Agent had no answer when asked what would happen to those from parts of the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, however, where demining efforts were expected to continue for years.

RETURN IN PROGRESS

15. (SBU) Following the camp visit, Blake flew by helicopter to the adjacent district of Mannar and traveled by road along a stretch between the Murunkan and Adampan divisions, where the GSL's military operations to capture the LTTE-controlled Wanni commenced in late 2007 and early 2008. He spoke with a GSL civil engineer at Giants Tank, a reservoir under rehabilitation by the World Bank that would supply water to an estimated 30,000 families once return to adjacent villages in the "rice bowl" of the North was complete. In front of a shop in Adampan, farmers said they had arrived too late to plant rice paddy during the current monsoon, which should continue through February, but were receiving from the World Food Program (WFP) monthly rations, which should continue for at least six months. At a school in Kattankulam, 10th-grade students -- many of whom had been displaced 16 times in the last three years -- had resumed their studies. Asked what they need most, they requested bicycles to get to school and more books for the school library. Soon their village was expected to be connected to the national power supply grid, at which point computers would also be needed.

DEMINING

16. (SBU) Although no mine-related injuries had been reported among the IDP returnee population or demining teams operating in the Wanni, the level of contamination remained high, a member of the Sri Lanka military's humanitarian demining unit told the A/S during a briefing at a site in Pallakuli, Mannar. To expedite returns, the military activists during his December 8-10 visit were reported separately (reftel). Military and civilian government authorities briefed

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COLOMBO 00001146 003 OF 003

return, delays in distribution of assistance caused by lack of access to areas of return for non-governmental organizations, and confusion among returnees regarding what they are entitled to and who is responsible for delivering it.

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